

# articles

## Reading *Sea of Blood* through Bertolt Brecht's *The Mother*: North Korean "Revolutionary Opera" and Nationalist Allegory

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### Abstract

*This essay examines the North Korean "revolutionary opera" Sea of Blood through a comparative reading with German dramatist Bertolt Brecht's "learning play" The Mother. Both dramas are comparable because of their Gorkian narratives, maternal protagonists, and origin in the 1930s. Sea of Blood distinguishes itself as iconic, sacred, and allegorical, whereas The Mother is mimetic, secular, and realistic. Comparative analysis reveals that the "revolutionary opera" and the "learning play" are in the traditions of nationalist and internationalist political drama. They are ideologically distinguished by an inherited Maoist peasant guerrilla ethos of armed struggle and a Leninist industrial proletarian ethos of party educational work.*

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บทความนี้เป็นการพิเคราะห์เชิงเปรียบเทียบ “ลัศตรโอเพร่าแห่งการปฏิวัติ” ของเกาหลีเหนอ เรื่อง “ทะเลเลือด” (Sea of Blood) และ “ลัศตรเพื่อการเรียนรู้” ของ Bertolt Brecht บักการลัศตร ชาวเยอรมันเรื่อง “แม่” (The Mother) โดยลัศตรเวทกั้งสองเรื่องนี้สามารถนำมาเปรียบเทียบกันได้ เมื่อจากลัศตรกั้งสองเรื่องนี้เป็นการเล่าเรื่องแบบปกอร์เดียน (Gorkian) ซึ่งมี แม่ เป็นตัวลัศตร เอก และมีตัวกำาเปิดในช่วงทศวรรษที่ 1930 เช่นเดียวกัน จากการวิเคราะห์เชิงเปรียบเทียบพบว่า ลัศตรเรื่องทะเลเลือดนั้นมีลักษณะเป็นเชิงสัญลักษณ์ ความตักดีสิกิร์และเชิงเปรียบเทียบ ในขณะที่ลัศตรเรื่อง แม่ นั้นมีลักษณะเป็นการล้อเลียน ในส่วนที่แสดงถึงความสมจังริง นอกจากนี้ “ลัศตรโอเพร่าแห่งการปฏิวัติ” ยังเป็นแบบแผนของลัศตรการมีมองของนักชาตินิยม และ “ลัศตรเพื่อการเรียนรู้” เป็นแบบแผนของลัศตรการเมืองของนักระหว่างชาติ (internationalist) จากแนวคิด ราษฎรชาติแล้ว ลัศตรเรื่องทะเลเลือดได้รับอิทธิพลมาจากการกลุ่มกองโรงแร่กองกำลังติดอาวุธผู้นิยม ลักษณะ รวมถึง ลัศตรเรื่อง แม่ ได้รับอิทธิพลมาจากกลุ่มกรรมกรอุดสาหกรรมแห่งพรดรดการ ที่กษาผู้นิยมเหล่านั้น

## Introduction

Since North Korea entered the military-first (*sōn'gun*) era in 1998, the state cultural apparatus has cultivated a new military-first literature and art that reflects new social and political demands in the crisis-ridden post-Marxist-Leninist period. In the performing arts, military-first politics and ideology have found dramatic incarnation in operatic productions that inherit the tradition of the "Sea of Blood-style opera," a genre that takes after the "revolutionary opera" (*hyōngmyōng kagūk*) that appeared in 1971 under the supervision of Kim Il Sung's then heir apparent Kim Jong Il. Although *Sea of Blood* (*P'ibada*) belongs to a former generation, the work is still performed in North Korea and continues to be lauded in the official media. As recently as February 14, 2011, the Korean Central News Agency reported that the opera is a "precious ideological, cultural heritage," adding, in national-Stalinist idiom, that it is "revolutionary and socialist in content and popular and ethnic-racial in form."<sup>1</sup> *Sea of Blood* is one of the great works of North Korea, a postcolonial heroic legend of the late leader Kim Il Sung and the North Korean state. North Korean sources on *Sea of Blood* explain that the "revolutionary opera" accords with and embodies the demands of the *Juche* (independent stand or spirit of self-reliance) ideology, conceived in 1962 in response to the Sino-Soviet split and incorporated in the state constitution in 1972, and that it is a "weapon for mass indoctrination" ("Party, Youth Papers Praise 'Sea of Blood' Opera"). While literary criticism has been undertaken on the opera itself, what does the work reveal in comparative analysis with other forms of political drama, particularly Brechtian drama?

German dramatist Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) and his play *The Mother* (*Die Mutter*, 1932) are not known to have influenced Kim Il Sung when he reportedly coauthored the original playscript of *Sea of Blood* in 1936, during his partisanship in the anti-colonial, anti-Japanese guerrilla resistance in Manchuria. The two dramas, however, share a number of similarities that render Brecht's "learning play" (*Lehrstück*) useful in understanding the drama and politics of *Sea of Blood*.<sup>2</sup> Both works were conceived in the 1930s; they involve a maternal protagonist in a revolutionary struggle; and they are modeled on Maxim Gorky's *Mother* (*Mat*, 1907), a sentimental, didactic novel that entered the canon of Soviet socialist realism in the 1930s. The North Korean and German dramas are, however, narratologically and politically distinguishable on the structural levels of character, plot, story, and theme. Brecht's loose, authorized dramatization of Gorky's tale concerns a working-class widow in czarist Russia, who protects her ill-fated Bolshevik son from police repression and gradually comes to solidarize with

the antiwar internationalist socialist program of the Bolsheviks.<sup>3</sup> *Sea of Blood* is about a Korean peasant woman in colonial Manchuria who leaps into the anti-colonial armed struggle of Kim Il Sung and his peasant guerrillas after the murder of her husband and youngest son by the Japanese colonial army. Respectively embodying the industrial proletarian ethos of Leninism<sup>4</sup> and the peasant guerrilla ethos of an inherited Maoism,<sup>5</sup> the “learning play” and “revolutionary opera” also operate in the distinctive narrative modes of a rationalist realism and nationalist allegory (David-West), the contrasts of which illuminate core literary and symbolic features of *Sea of Blood*.

### Why Not *The Measures Taken*?

Considering that the plot of *The Mother* does not unfold in a Northeast Asian setting, but in pre-revolutionary czarist Russia, one may argue for a comparison of *Sea of Blood* with Brecht's *The Measures Taken*, also known as *The Decision* (*Die Massnahme*, 1930), his first “learning play” on the Communist theme and coauthored with Hanns Eisler. That production, however, is somewhat removed from *Sea of Blood*. *The Measures Taken* is apparently based on the experiences of Eisler's brother, Gerhart Eisler, a Comintern agent who was dispatched to China in 1929 to 1931 as a representative of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) to purge the Chinese Communist Party of “spies” and “dissidents” (Willet 81; “The Man From Moscow”; Bentley 66; Grigoriev 156–160). Set up as a court trial before a Control Chorus – ostensibly, a Soviet Communist Party inquiry commission – *The Measures Taken* is built around the testimony of Four Agitators, Comintern agents from Moscow, who recount their illegal political education work among Chinese factory and barge workers in Mukden (Shenyang) city in 1920s Manchuria. Their mission is to “propagate the teachings of the Communist Classics” (which are never specified) in China and aid the urban-based Chinese Communist Party (Brecht, *The Measures Taken* 9, 11). They are soon endangered by the indiscipline, moral dilemmas, and radicalism of Young Comrade, an inexperienced cadre who “fell prey to pity” (14). He is eventually shot by the Four Agitators, who represent the Soviet Party, and his body is thrown into a lime pit. Condemned in the Soviet Union and East Germany and banned in the Eastern European Bloc, *The Measures Taken* is arguably a critique of the post-1924 policies of the Stalin-dominated Comintern, which led to the defeat of the Chinese Revolution (1925–1927), and an intuited anticipation of the Moscow Trials and Stalin's Great Terror (1936–1938).<sup>6</sup>

*Sea of Blood* embodies no comparable dramatic possibilities or dilemmas. For instance, in *The Measures Taken*, the Control Chorus says, "Embrace the butcher, but /Change the world: It needs it!" (25). This line can be read as an allusion to the Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-shek, who was supported by the Stalinist Comintern. After the Chinese Communists were ordered to form an alliance with Chiang's rightwing nationalist party, class collaboration resulted in anticommunist massacres in Shanghai, Wuhan, and other Chinese cities in 1927. Stalin broke with Chiang and sent emissaries to China to organize revolts, but these failed. Regarding the Great Terror, Brecht's unconscious anticipation of it is interpretable when the Four Agitators say, "We decided: That he must disappear, completely"; "[V]iolence is the only means whereby this deadly/World may be changed"; and "We are not permitted not to kill." These are positions the Control Chorus supports with the remark, "We/Sympathize with you./It was not easy to do what was right./It was not you who sentenced him, but/Reality." Thereafter, the Control Chorus ends the drama with the following ominous words: "Anger and tenacity, knowledge and indignation/Swift action, utmost deliberation/Cold endurance, unending perseverance/Comprehension of the individual and comprehension of the whole: Taught only by reality can/Reality be changed" (32-34). One should note that beside the ban on *The Measures Taken* in the Soviet sphere of influence, Brecht and his family prohibited performance of the play until 1998, because certain ambiguities allowed the work to be seen as apologia for totalitarianism, sacrifice of the individual, and mass extermination (Enarsson). *The Measures Taken* is a contradictory work, yet unlike *Sea of Blood*, it does not involve armed struggle, but the weapon of education and the word (*The Measures Taken* 13). As the character Policeman admonishes a Chinese factory where the Young Comrade is distributing illegal literature: "This leaflet is more dangerous than ten cannons" (20). Such an idea is not found in the North Korean opera.

## Brecht's Politics and Aesthetics

Cultural critic Raymond Williams describes Brecht's work as the "most important and original in European drama since Ibsen and Strindberg" (Williams 316). The German dramatist was, after all, a professional artist and devoted himself to the theater throughout his adult life. As a youth, he was radicalized by the First World War, during which he briefly served as a medical orderly in his hometown of Augsburg, developed strong antiwar views, and supported the failed German revolution of 1918 to 1919, which was inspired by the Russian Revolution. *Baal* (1918) and *Drums in the Night*

(1920) were two of Brecht's first major postwar plays. But it was not until 1926 that he began to seriously study Marx and Lenin, openly basing his dramatic work on Marxist ideas from 1930. Brecht's self-acknowledged "Marxist teacher" was the anti-Stalinist German philosopher Karl Korsch (1886–1961), whose Berlin lectures and discussion group on dialectical materialism Brecht attended from 1929 and 1931, respectively. Brecht's eventual gravitation to the Stalinist movement is a complex matter, but related to his pragmatism.<sup>7</sup>

Despite his documented association with the German Communist Party (pre- and postwar) and the Stalinist Comintern, Brecht was not a party member. He prided himself on being an independent artist, and he rejected the totalitarian doctrine of socialist realism, declared by Stalin's cultural czar Andrei Zhdanov at the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress. While Brecht appears to have liked the phrase "socialist realism," he had a personal interpretation that permitted the embrace of certain modernist aesthetic techniques while rejecting party control, bureaucratically approved model works, and narrow prohibitive conceptions of realism, as testified in the so-called "Brecht-Lukács debate" of 1938 to 1939 and in the ten theses on socialist realism in Brecht's 1953 to 1954 notebooks (Lunn; Brecht, "On Socialist Realism"). Rejection of Zhdanovism (Stalinist cultural nationalism) is evident in Brecht's open contempt for official East German socialist realist productions and Soviet-Stanislavskian theater. After his American exile during Hitler's rule and relocation to East Germany in 1948, he brushed off official Soviet theater as annoying, religiously inclined, and dogmatic "kitsch" (Essl 158; Spiers 180–181). Despite official hostility, Brecht had an international reputation and was granted a theater house, the Berliner Ensemble, which he headed until his death. He was later converted into a "classic" of East German socialist realism.

While Brecht was an eclectic, impressionistic, intuitive, and non-systematic thinker, the interpretations of Marxism he was exposed to made him aggressively rational in his aesthetic views. That orientation enabled him to formulate his non-empathetic, non-Aristotelian theory of "epic theater" (*episches Theater*), which he first articulated in 1926 and formally produced in 1931. The famous and related theory of the "alienation effect" or "estrangement effect" (*Verfremdungseffekt*) does not appear in his writings until 1936. Brecht's conception of "epic theater," it should be noted, was inspired by the leftwing agitprop theater of Erwin Piscator (1893–1966), whose "epic drama" Brecht became familiar with in Berlin in 1924. Both men collaborated from 1927 to 1928. Piscator aimed for an austere, scientifically

detached, technological, and unsentimental “proletarian theater,” like dramatized lectures and newspapers, to develop socialist consciousness in the working class. Although this theatrical school had a tremendous impact on Brecht, he desired greater literary value in dramatic art (Esslin 23-24). The formative experience with Piscator is seen in a number of Brecht’s “learning plays,” including in his most politically conscious effort, *The Mother*. That play, which Walter Benjamin has said was more of a sociological experiment (Benjamin, “A Family Drama in the Epic Theater” 560), stands as a transitional work between Brecht’s youthful spontaneous phase and his mature rational phase and was his last great attempt to address the problems of Marxist perspective and leadership in the international working class movement.<sup>8</sup>

## Political and Dramatic Antitheses

Opening in around 1899 with the major action placed between May 1905 to October 1917, *The Mother* is set in a factory town in czarist Russia, but it goes beyond the national and parochial concerns of *Sea of Blood*. Brecht’s drama embodies the theme that the workers of the world have no country, a classical Marxist position. The play, moreover, is pervaded with the spirit of internationalism and the orthodox Marxist program of world socialist revolution. Unlike the nationalist allegory of the North Korean “revolutionary opera,” with its petty-bourgeois guerrilla ethos and setting in a peasant village in Japanese-occupied Manchuria, Brecht’s story of Pelagea Vlassova, the “widow of a worker and the mother of a worker,” renders a proletarian ethos that is incorporated, in its subsequent episodes, as a dramatic realization of Lenin’s antiwar socialist policy of revolutionary defeatism, developed during the First World War (1914–1918), which held that socialists in imperialist countries must reject “social patriotism,” oppose their national governments, and mobilize the working class against war. (The production notes for *The Mother* have relevant slogans from Lenin.) *Sea of Blood* does not incarnate this particular perspective and tends more towards the socialist patriotism of the 1930s Stalin-dominated Comintern. That is not unusual since the opera originates in the 1930s, when Kim Il Sung was a member of the Mao Zedong-led Chinese Communist Party. At the time, the party was a member and branch organization of the Comintern (which Stalin dissolved in 1943), formed an alliance with Chiang Kai-shek’s anticommunist Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) in the war against Imperial Japan, and held the Menshevik-Stalinist line of a “bloc of four classes” of

peasants, workers, petty-bourgeoisie, and national capitalists (Benton; Heinzig; Trotsky, *Problems of the Chinese Revolution: 1927–1931*).

The political and ideological contrast between *The Mother* and *Sea of Blood* is also seen in the glorification of arms and petty-bourgeois nationalism in the North Korean “revolutionary opera.” That orientation unfolds in act one, when the Mother’s husband Yun Sop and a young male villager, Dal Sam, discuss intensifying repression under Japanese colonial occupation:

**Yun Sop:** Our stolen homeland flows with blood.

**Yun Sop and Dal Sam:** Our people’s feelings of revenge grow stronger all the time. (*Sea of Blood* 4; italics added)

Yun Sup, who is part of a radical peasant movement that seeks to reform the land rent system, is eventually captured by a Japanese punitive force, burned alive, and shot as he condemns his executioners. Some months later in act two, scene two, the Mother comes in contact with Cho Dong Chun, a political worker in the Anti-Japanese Guerrilla Army. With Cho’s urging, the Mother sanctions her eldest son, Won Nam’s joining the anti-Japanese guerrilla resistance.

**Won Nam:** To liberate my country drowning in a sea of blood/I’ll take up arms in the name of revolution./I’ll fight as a soldier of the revolution/To restore my nation. (27)

By the end of the opera in act seven, after a Japanese garrison has been destroyed by the guerrilla army, the guerrillaist and petty-bourgeois nationalist politics of *Sea of Blood* is prominently encapsulated in the words of the Mother, her son Won Nam, her daughter Gap Sun, the village girl Yong Sil (a Young Communist league member), and the chorus (*pangchang*):

**Mother:** How can I recount/All the bitter stories this accursed society burnt into my heart!/My husband met his death in a cruel sea of blood,/ My youngest son was ruthlessly murdered by the enemy.

**Chorus:** Revolt! All you oppressed,/Rise up gun in hand!/Revolution is the only road to life./Rise up in the struggle for life.

**Mother, Won Nam, Gap Sun and Yong Sil:** We’ll all rise in a revolutionary war/With the guerrillas at our head.

**Women:** The banner of freedom will fly/Over our blood-soaked land/On the morning of national liberation.

**Chorus:** Revolt! All you oppressed,/Rise up gun in hand!/Revolution is the only road to life./Rise up in the struggle for life.

[...]

**Chorus:** We are the fire spreading over the world,/We are the hammers breaking iron chains;/Our hope is the Red Banner,/Struggle is our only slogan./All you exploiters who lust for blood,/We will smother your cries of greed./Our ranks swell to a hundred times their strength/For that fierce final battle to come./Rise up in arms, all you oppressed!//Throw off the yoke, you enslaved!//Nothing but hope is before us now./Onward, fighters, unafraid!//All you exploiters who lust for our blood,/We will smother your cries of greed./Our ranks swell to a hundred times their strength/For the fierce final battle to come. (56-57; italics added)

This homiletic martial language, which fetishizes guerilla leadership, national liberationism, and armed struggle, says nothing about internationalism, socialism, the vanguard working-class party, and the urban proletariat. Moreover, the words of the characters recall the ultra-leftist Maoist slogans "power grows out of the barrel of a gun" and "to rebel is justified" propagated during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976),<sup>9</sup> the period *Sea of Blood* premiered in North Korea as a film (1969) and "revolutionary opera" (1971). Contrastingly, the book takes precedence over the gun in *The Mother*, as noted in the song "Praise of Learning" in act six, when Vlassova is studying how to read:

Study from bottom up,/for you who will take the leadership,/It is not too late!/Study the ABC; it is not enough,/but study it! Do not become discouraged,/begin! You must know everything!

Study, man in exile!/Study, man in the prison!/Study, wife in your kitchen!/Study, old-age pensioner!/You must prepare to take command now!//Locate yourself a school, homeless folk!/Go search some knowledge, you who freeze!/You who starve, reach for a book:/it will be a weapon./You must prepare to take command now.

Don't be afraid to question, comrades!/Never believe on faith,/see for yourself!/What you yourself don't learn/you don't know./Question the reckoning/you yourself must pay it./Set down your finger on each small item, asking:/where do you get this?/You must prepare to take command now! (Brecht, *The Mother* 79)

Besides these points of contrast in Brecht, the aestheticization of vengeance and violent retribution as seen in *Sea of Blood* is not a stimulus

for dramatic action in *The Mother*. Rather, central to the Brechtian "learning play" is a painstaking effort to engage in political agitation and education to explain how workers are oppressed; to politically expose concrete instances of this oppression; to develop and raise the self-knowledge, political consciousness, and class consciousness of the working class; and to train the proletariat in a Marxist point of view. That perspective is based on Lenin's orthodox Marxist guidelines on party organizational work in *What Is to Be Done?* (1902). Specifically, political education under the industrial proletarian Leninist party lies at the heart of *The Mother*. *Sea of Blood*, on the other hand, valorizes the local and isolated armed struggle of a Maoist peasant guerrilla army.<sup>10</sup> This, of course, reflects the "guerrilla tradition" that was established in North Korea after the Great Purge of 1956 to 1960 and when Kim Il Sung's guerrilla faction in the Workers' Party of Korea secured power in all sections of North Korean government by 1966. Kim's guerrillas had historical and political roots in the Chinese Communist Party and its anti-Japanese struggle in Manchuria in the 1930s and 1940s.

Dramatically, *The Mother* and *Sea of Blood* are irreconcilable, and their incompatibility can be seen in the mimetic significance of Brecht's play, particularly in its employment not of an idealist nationalist allegory, but of a historical, internationalist, and sociopolitical verisimilitude. Mimesis is "the theory of the universality of reflection in art," and realism in art is connected to the mimetic human relation to reality and nature (Morawski 29, 30, 34, 35). The allegorism of *Sea of Blood* is less committed to that relation. Consequently, its symbolic images become a historical and metaphysical. The North Korean "revolutionary opera" separates idea from social practice. This is not the case in *The Mother*, as confirmed in Walter Benjamin's 1932 review of Brecht's political drama:

The mother [in Brecht's *The Mother*] is praxis [i.e., human action] incarnate. We see this when she makes tea, and we see it when she wraps up the piroshkis [i.e., baked or fried patties]; when she is visiting her son in prison, we see that every single thing she does with her hands serves Communism; and when she is hit by stones and the policemen strike her with their rifle butts, we see that whenever a hand is raised against her it is in vain. The mother is praxis incarnate. This means that we shall find in her not enthusiasm but reliability. Yet she would not be reliable if she had not, at first, raised objections against Communism. (Benjamin, "A Family Drama in the Epic Theater" 561)

The Brechtian mother is not an allegorical personification who stands for abstract ideas, virtues, and categorical imperatives. Such imperatives in

*Sea of Blood* are stated by Kim Jong Il in the idea "that blood must be repaid with blood and that violence must be countered with violence" and "the 'sea of blood' of trials should be turned into the 'sea of blood' of struggle" (Kim, Jong Il, *On the Art of the Cinema* 42, *On Juche Literature* 166). Vlassova is devoid of such mindless, retributive, and timeless bloodlust, even after her Bolshevik son Pavel is shot dead. The Chorus says, "Even those who shot at him/were not different from him, *nor forever unteachable*" (Brecht, *The Mother* 110; italics added). Reason and education are what come to guide Vlassova in her struggle. She is a subject of conscious investigation – external and internal – not emotional or sentimental identification. Vlassova is the image of a real person, a real woman, whose presence dramatically and didactically reincarnates concrete human activity, as well as certain practical stages of psychology when a person confronts complex social and political reality. Her realism as a character is connected to her skepticism, and her skepticism, combined with self-examination, issues from empirical, material life, the basis of her dramatic image.

For example, when Vlassova has not yet understood the revolutionary activities of her son after his joining the Bolshevik Party, she expresses doubts and fears befitting of a concerned mother: "[I]t's disturbing to see the way he reads all those books; and I worry about the way he and this crowd run around together" (42); "I can see that Pavel is on the wrong path" (46); "A man has been led astray and drawn in (47); "I am sure this is a very bad cause I'm about to help—but I must keep Pavel out of it" (49). These words, "disturbing," "wrong path," "led astray," "very bad cause," and "keep Pavel out of it," are significant. *Sea of Blood* does not permit the central character to such possibilities, much less the difficult experience in the development of socialist class consciousness. Whereas Brecht's mother is imperfect, resists, grapples, assimilates, and eventually joins the international socialist movement, the Mother in *Sea of Blood* takes leaps of faith. She despairs at first, yes. But given the metaphysical (non-dialectical) construction of her intellectual physiognomy and character typology, she knows neither skepticism nor vacillation in her turn to the anti-fascist, anti-colonial, anti-Japanese struggle, only a vengeance-driven enthusiasm reinforced by the call for "sacred battle" and the gospel of Kim Il Sung and the guerrilla knights of Mount Paekdu, with the respective language, imagery, and metaphor appearing in the opera. Reading *The Mother* and *Sea of Blood*, at least twenty-one political and dramatic antitheses between the dramas are identifiable (Fig. 1).

<i>The Mother</i>	<i>Sea of Blood</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leninism</li> <li>• Socialism</li> <li>• Internationalism</li> <li>• Universalism</li> <li>• Revolutionary party</li> <li>• Political education</li> <li>• Working class</li> <li>• City</li> <li>• Logos</li> <li>• Reason</li> <li>• Didactic</li> <li>• Realism</li> <li>• Mimesis</li> <li>• Detachment</li> <li>• Secular</li> <li>• Historical</li> <li>• Curvilinear</li> <li>• Matricentrism</li> <li>• Humanism</li> <li>• Materialism</li> <li>• Dialectics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maoism</li> <li>• Patriotism</li> <li>• Nationalism</li> <li>• Particularism</li> <li>• Guerrilla army</li> <li>• Armed struggle</li> <li>• Peasantry</li> <li>• Village</li> <li>• Pathos</li> <li>• Faith</li> <li>• Homiletic</li> <li>• Allegory</li> <li>• Iconics</li> <li>• Attachment</li> <li>• Sacred</li> <li>• Epical</li> <li>• Episodic</li> <li>• Patricentrism</li> <li>• Anthropocentrism</li> <li>• Subjectivism</li> <li>• Metaphysics</li> </ul>

Fig. 1. Political and dramatic antitheses in *The Mother* and *Sea of Blood*.

In contradistinction to the peasant Mother, Vlassova's conversion to Marxism is not based on spontaneity or faith. After socialist ideas are introduced from outside her day-to-day experiences as per Leninism, her conversion develops slowly and tortuously and in stages (Lenin). She gradually becomes aware of the class struggle and the social class she belongs to. The growth of Vlassova's socialist consciousness begins when she despairingly resigns herself to her poverty and hunger; when her son brings Bolshevik cadre to their home; when czarist police ransack the house; when she intervenes in Pavel's work and distributes leaflets at a factory; when she sees workers arrested for reading the Marxist literature; when the young cadre educate her in the basics of Marxist political economy; when she sees a peaceful marcher (Smilgin) shot for carrying a red flag at the May First demonstration, compelling her to participate; when Pavel is arrested; when she confronts a petty-bourgeois pacifist (the Teacher) and learns to read; when she visits Pavel in prison; when she conducts political work among the peasantry; when Pavel returns as she operates an illegal printing press; when

she encounters the outlook of lesserevilism among workers; when Pavel is shot dead en route to Finland; when she exposes middle-class religious hypocrisy; when the First World War creates political disorientation and inertness in the working class; when the police beat her unconscious for shouting antiwar slogans; when the czarist government begins a smash-up of the Bolshevik Party; when she more passionately commits herself to the "revolutionary defeatist" policy; and finally, when she carries a red flag and marches with strikers against the war and against the czar on the threshold of the workers' seizure of state power. There is nothing like these concrete political, psychological, and sociological stages and processes in *Sea of Blood*. On the matter of the smash-up of the Bolshevik Party, it is arguably one of the most significant historically inspired events in *The Mother*, despite its brevity. As Leon Trotsky recounts in *The History of the Russian Revolution*:

The [First World War] produced a dreadful desolation in the underground movement. After the arrest of the Duma faction [in November 1914] the Bolsheviks had no centralised party organisation at all. The local party committees had an episodic existence, and often had no connections with the workers districts. Only scattered groups, circles and solitary individuals did anything. However, the reviving strike movement gave them some spirit and some strength in the factories. They gradually began to find each other and build up the district connections. The underground work revived. (Trotsky 62)

Vlassova becomes one among these "scattered groups, circles, and solitary individuals." Yet the attempted destruction of the workers' party by the czarist government propels her further as a politically conscious working-class individual, not an allegorical *socialist realist* positive hero, into the internationalist-socialist struggle against autocracy, capitalism, and imperialist war.

## **Individual and History**

Brecht's *The Mother* is about Pelagea Vlassova's individual and social transformation, and her "individual subjectivity" is never collapsed into "national identity," as is the case of the peasant Mother in *Sea of Blood* (Kim, Kyung Hyun 93). Revealingly, unlike the mother of the "learning play," the mother of the North Korean "revolutionary opera" has neither a first name nor a last name and is addressed only as "mother," "she," "woman," and "you." The character is an unindividuated icon of patricentric mother power (Fromm; Cho). Her national fatalism, moreover, is a representation of the "disappearance of the *individual in the general*" (Plekhanov, "On the Role of the

Individual in History"; italics original). Vlassova's individuality, in contrast, is accentuated and complexified as she becomes politically conscious, joins the antiwar socialist movement, and intervenes as a revolutionary subject in the social historical process. That set of dramatic events makes Brecht's work a "drama of individualism," a distinguishing characteristic of modern drama (Lukács, "The Sociology of Modern Drama" 151). This, however, is not a doctrinaire individualism. Lukács says:

[T]he drama of individualism [is] a drama of demands upon personality made conscious. For this reason men's convictions, their ideologies, are of the highest artistic importance, for they alone can lend a symptomatic significance to the naked [life] data. Only they can bring the vital centers of drama and of character into adjustment. However, this adjustment will always remain problematic; it will never be more than a "solution," an almost miraculous coherence of mutually antagonistic forces, for the ideology threatens in turn to reduce character to a "contrapuntal necessity." (158)

The image of Vlassova as a socially and historically determined individual is not without faults. Lukács' somewhat exaggerated, but creditable, observation that the intellectual didacticism of the Brechtian "learning play" creates characters who are "mere spokesmen" (Lukács, *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle* 87; Lunn 85), points to a certain typological one-sidedness in the mother's characterization. That is, even in her growth, change, and increasing consciousness of her class position, she is too obviously an instructive, tendentious figure. But that is probably unavoidable and desirable in *Lehrstück* "epic theater," which seeks to divide the audience, provoke critical thought like a lecture, and afford the spectator practical knowledge in the class struggle. Brecht says the following:

*The Mother* was written in the style of a *Lehrstück* ("play for learning"), although it requires professional actors. The play's dramaturgy is anti-metaphysical, materialistic and NON-ARISTOTELIAN. Thus it declines to assist the spectator in *surrendering himself to empathy* in the unthinking fashion of the Aristotelian dramaturgy; and it relates to certain psychic effects, as for instance, catharsis, in an essentially different manner: In the same way as it refuses to tacitly hand over its heroes to the world as though to an inalterable destiny, it also has no intention of handing over the spectator to a "suggestive" theater experience. Rather its concern is to teach the spectator a most definitely practical conduct that is intended to change the world, and for this reason he must be afforded a fundamentally different attitude in the theater from that to which he is accustomed. (Brecht, "Brecht's Notes to *The Mother*" 133; capitals and italics original)

Spokesmanship in *The Mother* should not be confused with the emotional and suggestive homiletics of the North Korean "revolutionary opera," which reflect the subjectivism and voluntarism of the Stalinist- and Maoist-influenced *Juche* ideology of North Korea. (*Juche* literally means "subject," and before it became an ideology in 1962, it referred to the "Korean revolution" in the national program of the Workers' Party of Korea, as emphasized in Kim Il Sung's anti-de-Stalinization speech of December 28, 1955.) Subjectivism, as the Russian Marxist materialist philosopher Georgi Plekhanov says, limits the rights of human reason (Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View of History* 221). *Sea of Blood* is like subjectivism in that it is not consciousness raising, but politically hypnotizing, placing a mysterious "great man" – even if Kim Il Sung appears as a metaphor at a distance – before a crowd, and the crowd is expected to follow him blindly and unquestioningly. There is no dramatic space for the role of critical individuality and personality in the North Korean production. The nationalist allegory is exemplified in the closing seventh act of the opera, when the unnamed Mother opens the gate of the walled city and joins the guerrillas in storming the Japanese garrison (Fig. 2). The image contrasts with the final scene of *The Mother*, when Vlassova marches at the head of the demonstration of striking workers, carrying the red flag (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Mother armed and opening the gate of the walled city in *Sea of Blood*.



Fig. 3. Pelagea Vlassova carrying the red flag in Bertolt Brecht's *The Mother*.

Signaling the distance from realism in the North Korean "revolutionary opera," the Mother, her eldest son-partisan Wonam, and guerrilla operative Cho Dong Chun, and other subaltern characters function as guerrilla leader Kim Il Sung's allegorical intermediaries.<sup>11</sup> Vlassova serves no such function in relation to the international socialist movement. She is an individual who becomes a class-conscious proletarian and antiwar Bolshevik agitator, not a go-between for a heroicized great leader or an apotheosized nation-state. There is not a small indication here that the nationalist allegory of *Sea of Blood* and its military psychomachia (battle of the soul) embody, on the aesthetic level, pre-modern or medieval tendencies (emotion, faith, spontaneity), whereas the Marxism of *The Mother* is the expression of modern or Enlightenment principles (reason, science, discipline). In addition, from a comparatist perspective, the national-Stalinist poetics of *Sea of Blood* appear to straddle the worlds of medieval homiletic theater and early renaissance morality drama. The former is characterized by metaphorical personifications and the latter by the intrusion of social human beings, as universalized types, into the allegorical setting. That issue requires elaboration in another study.

Despite Brecht's emphasis on the individual and history, as opposed to an inalterable nation and destiny as embodied in *Sea of Blood*, one cannot help but notice that *The Mother* does not attempt to see beyond the immediate achievement of the workers' seizure of state power in the October 1917 Russian Revolution, co-led by Lenin and Trotsky. Vlassova is sixty years old when the drama closes. Supposing she lives for another fifteen years, that is, until 1932, the historical period when the play was first staged, Vlassova will have witnessed the failure of the socialist revolutions in the West, the isolation of the Soviet workers' state, the devastation of the Civil War and foreign intervention, the implementation of Lenin's New Economic Policy, the growth of bureaucracy in the Bolshevik Party, the death of Lenin, the rise of Stalin and his conservative nationalist theory of "socialism in one country," the defeat of the Marxist Left Opposition, and the expulsion of Trotsky from the Communist Party and the Soviet Union. She, in short, will have witnessed events leading to the Stalinist "about-face from proletarian internationalism to national Bolshevism,"<sup>12</sup> that is, the political betrayal of the principles, perspective, and program of the Russian Revolution. Without some indication of the political complications in the post-revolutionary period, the "learning play" imparts a politically limited, if not ineffective, message. Nonetheless, it retains the internationalist spirit of October.

While Brecht's dramatization of Gorky's *Mother* has some of the ascetic and puritanical qualities of that novel, the play is without its sentimentalism

and the Christian message of religious salvation that is developed into Gorky's idea of the industrial proletarian ethos. That message is poignantly captured at the end of the novel when the old mother is being savagely beaten by gendarmes for distributing leaflets. She says: "They can't kill my spirit—my living spirit" (Gorky 383). Political religious elements of this sort pervade *Sea of Blood* on a grand scale, reflecting the idealist and metaphysical world outlook of *Juche* ideology (Park, "The Nature and Evolution of *Juche* Ideology," *North Korea: The Politics of Unconventional Wisdom*). Besides the problem of religion, Brecht's maternal protagonist is more perceptive; his secondary characters develop; and his drama is more politically discerning. The latter case is likely the result of his study and assimilation of the Bolsheviks' political experience from 1905 to 1917. Reading or watching *The Mother*, however, is not like reading Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky. A work of applied, didactic, or rationalistic art is still no substitute for political writing. Even if the Leninist outlook in the "learning play" is basically correct, there are serious practical limitations. *The Mother*, in any event, reveals aesthetic, dramatic, and political possibilities that manifest antithetically in *Sea of Blood*, enabling closer understanding of the "revolutionary opera."

## Conclusion

Reading *Sea of Blood* through Bertolt Brecht's *The Mother* brings into relief dramatic, political, and structural features in the North Korean "revolutionary opera" that are not fully appreciated by examining the work alone. One finds that even though it is officially called socialist realist, the opera credited to Kim Il Sung and produced under Kim Jong Il is not a case of realism. The function of character, plot, story, and theme in *Sea of Blood* has less mimetic significance than it does ideological significance. Moreover, the rational and the real and the individual and history are subordinated to allegory, nation, and emotion. Relevant to that subordination, North Korean commentators thirty-one years ago described *Sea of Blood* as an "immortal classical masterpiece" with an "inexhaustible figurative power" (Chai and Hyon 29-30). If symbolic, iconic figuration in the "revolutionary opera" is indeed immortal and inexhaustible that means the world of the opera operates outside time and in the frame of mythical thinking, unlike the literary world of realism, which embodies coming into being and passing away.<sup>13</sup> *Sea of Blood* does, of course, have an empirical and historical basis in events of the Depression-era 1930s, the "dark gulf" of Korean colonialism, during which Imperial Japan became a fascist state and launched an aggressive war to bring neighboring Asian nations into its sphere of economic and

political influence (Buzo 35–45). Anti-Japanese armed struggle movements were also a reality in the wartime period. Extra-literary conditions cannot be dismissed in their literary incarnation. *Sea of Blood*, nevertheless, is not about the demands upon individual personality in the class and national liberation struggle of Korea. This is not a drama about a real popular movement, but an abstract principle. Comparative analysis with Brecht's "learning play" confirms that the "revolutionary opera" is a metaphysical nationalist allegory and also reveals that a non-Leninist, Maoist-inspired politics is integral to the movement of its symbolic story-world.

That said, what are the implications of the forty-year-old *Sea of Blood* in the North Korean military-first era? When the drama appeared in 1971, eighteen years had passed since the three-year Korean War ended; postwar reconstruction and rapid industrialization with "fraternal" assistance was successful; North Korea achieved relative prosperity, especially as the bureaucratic-reformist Soviet Union and Maoist China vied for influence through economic and financial arrangements; Kim Il Sung was fifty-nine; and the national-Stalinist state could still be called a party-state. North Korea in 2011 is a different place. After the de-Maoization and marketization of China in 1978 and collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, North Korea confronted an economic and ideological crisis that required elimination of Marxism-Leninism from the 1992 constitution. Problems were exacerbated when Kim Il Sung died of a sudden heart attack in 1994 and as the country descended into the great famine of 1996 to 1999. During that period, the authority of the party eroded, and the National Defense Commission became the highest state organ in 1998. North Korea emerged in the military-first era as an impoverished failed state, making cautious concessions to world capitalism, initiating price and wage reforms in 2002, confronting the breakdown of the information control system, experiencing social psychological shifts and the rise of markets in a bureaucratically planned economy, deleting "communism" from the 2009 constitution, and now witnessing an ailing sixty-nine-year-old Kim Jong Il preparing to hand over power to his son Kim Jong Un. Given the great structural and characterological changes in North Korea since the 1990s, *Sea of Blood* clearly belongs to another time, that of Kim Il Sung and *Juche*, his "creative application of Marxism-Leninism" (*Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* 2). Now, the post-Marxist-Leninist regime has adopted new policies and tactics, such as "new thinking" (*saeroun kwanjöm*) and "pragmatic socialism" (*silli sahoejuüi*). *Sea of Blood* no longer reflects the social character of North Korea, but the "revolutionary opera" retains the force of a tradition the regime needs for self-justification. The nationalist

allegory is a “symbolic mediation on the destiny of community” (Jameson 56)<sup>14</sup> and continues its story in the military-first narrative of army-people unity and the military-first ethnic-race (*sōn'gun minjok*).

## Notes

1. The Korean phrases are “*kwichunghan sasangchōngshinjōk, munhwajōk chaebu*” and “*naeyong esō hyōngmyōngjōk igo sahoejuūijōk imyō hyōngshik esō inminjōk igo minjokjōkin*.” See “*Chosŏnshik-ŭi dokch'angjōkin hyōngmyōng kagük P'ipada*” [Korea-Style Original Revolutionary Opera *Sea of Blood*] and the official English translation “*Ideological and Cultural Heritage of DPRK*,” *Korean News*, 14 February 2011.
2. *Sea of Blood* was first adapted as a film in 1969. Both the cinematic version and opera adaptation in 1971 were produced under the direction of Kim Jong Il.
3. “Of course none of this is Russia,” said the Soviet playwright Sergei Tretyakov. “It is Germany. Change the Russian names in the play to German ones and you will have the story of a contemporary German professional revolutionary woman doing her bit to enlighten millions of German Vlasovas who have not yet recognized reality” (Tretiakov 25).
4. Though Lenin disapproved of it, the term “Leninism” was used in his lifetime and as early as 1904. This paper uses “Leninism” in the following sense: an international political doctrine that centers on collective party leadership of the working class, seeking the consolidation of working class states. The definition is derived from a telegram Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs Leon Trotsky dispatched from Tiflis to Moscow on January 22, 1924, a day after Lenin’s death. That document defines “Leninism” as follows: “The immortal part of Lenin, his teaching, his work, his method, his example [.]” Referring to “that party that he created,” the document adds, “Our party is Leninism in action. Our party is the collective leader of the workers.” The terms “collective thought” and “collective will” are also linked to the party that holds the “lantern of Leninism.” The telegram uses the phrases “the working class of the world” and “the first working class state” in conjunction with Lenin’s leadership. See “*Trotzky on Lenin*,” *Miami News-Metropolis* (1924). For further discussion on Leninism, see Neil Harding, *Leninism* (1996).
5. Maoism is understood here in the sense of a left-nationalist political doctrine that combines the tactic of peasant-based guerrilla war, the bloc of four classes (peasants, workers, petty-bourgeoisie, and national capitalists), two-stage revolution (bourgeois-democratic and socialist), and the Stalinist program of “socialism in one country.” These are the essential components of the more Sino-centric Mao Zedong thought (Mao Zedong *sixiang*). Liu Shaoqi defines Mao Zedong thought as follows: (1) “the doctrine that integrates the theory of Marxism-Leninism with the practice of the Chinese revolution,” (2) “Chinese communism,” (3) “Marxism being developed and improved through its application in China,” (4) “Mao Zedong's theories with regard to Chinese history, Chinese society and the Chinese revolution and relevant policies,” (5)

"the theory which integrates Marxist-Leninist theories with the practice of the Chinese revolution," (6) "communism and Marxism applied to China," and (7) "the theory and practice of communism applied to China." See Liu Shaoqi, *On the Party* (1945).

6. Brecht's testimony and description of the play before the House Committee on Un-American Activities on October 30, 1947, does not support this interpretation, but it is still within the range of dramatic possibility ("From the Testimony of Berthold Brecht" 34–36).
7. After the Reichstag fire two months after Hitler's rise to power in January 1933, Brecht and his family fled Germany. He solidarized with Stalin's anti-fascist "popular front" policy and avoided criticizing the Soviet Union. Brecht seems to have believed that the anti-Trotskyist campaign in the Great Terror (1936–1938) was legitimate. Walter Benjamin, a good friend of Brecht's, recounts from a private discussion in 1938 that the playwright followed Soviet developments and read the writings of the exiled Trotsky. Brecht, however, held a positive view of Stalin at this time and was convinced that the Soviet Union was being internally undermined. He thus rejected Trotsky's criticism of Stalinism as irresponsible polemics. Seven years earlier, though, Brecht described Trotsky as the greatest living writer in Europe. Brecht was not unaware of Stalin's crimes (the Moscow trials, the Stalin-Hitler pact, the Yalta and Potsdam agreements, etc.), yet he never publicly condemned the Soviet dictator. Whatever misgivings Brecht had were expressed privately and, as in his posthumously published *Me-Ti: The Book of Changes*, cryptically (Benjamin, "Diary Entries, 1938" 338; "May–June, 1931" 477).
8. *The Mother* was written during Brecht's "learning play" period (1929–1932) and was not a readily accepted work. In 1932, the German critics disparaged it, and the police prohibited it after thirty performances; in 1933, the Nazis banned it; in 1935, the artistic left at the New York City Theater Union bowdlerized it, and the American press condemned it; and before its 1951 premier in East Germany, the Soviet and East German Stalinists denounced it as "experimental" and "formalist." Brecht conceded to pressure and made some modifications. *The Mother* remains controversial, but has had quite a few international stagings. See a production history in Bradley, *Brecht and Political Theatre: The Mother on Stage*.
9. Brecht came in contact with Maoist ideology two decades after writing *The Mother*. Political disillusionment in East Germany led to him to believe that the 1949 Chinese Revolution and Mao Zedong regime represented a genuine alternative. Brecht is known to have been attracted to Mao's essay "On Contradiction" (1937) in 1954.
10. One should note that Lenin and Trotsky defended the Korean struggle for independence against imperial-colonial Japan. The Lenin-Trotsky government also aided Korean independence fighters in Siberia in 1918, providing arms, funding, and training for the Independence Army of Korean nationalist Yi Tong-hwi. General Yi's army was incorporated into the Soviet Army in 1921. While supporting the Korean liberation struggle, Lenin and Trotsky rejected the non-internationalist and non-working class orientation of Korean

nationalism and guerrillaism as petty-bourgeois, that is, as seeking a more comfortable position within the world capitalist system and ultimately aligning itself with bourgeois ideology.

11. "Subaltern" is not used here in the sense found in postcolonial theory. The word has a military definition and is adapted as a literary-theoretical concept that designates good or positive characters that are thematically subordinated or faithful to representations of General Kim Il Sung in North Korean socialist *realist* literature.
12. This phrase is from Soviet studies historian David Brandenberger. The author does not, however, agree with Brandenberger's claim that national Bolshevism is not "nationalist" or with his restriction of "nationalism" to notions of "ethnic advancement." There is such a thing as economic nationalism, which is the corollary of etatism, and Brandenberger's discussion on "Russocentric etatism" in fact confirms the relation between nationalism and Stalinism (Brandenberger 44–45, 267n24).
13. The statement on "iconic figuration," or allegorization, is not about interpretation. Dramatic and literary works assume an independent life and open themselves to numerous interpretative approaches, methods, and possibilities. On mythical thinking, see Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*; "Myth and Religion"; *The Myth of the State*; and *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Volume Two: Mythical Thought*.
14. The appropriateness of the phrase in the case of North Korean *nationalist allegory* does not validate Jameson's position that "all literature must be read" as a medium that symbolically mediates communal destiny. That claim abstractly and absolutely imposes an *a priori* political-interpretative principle on different types of literature, preventing specific forms, genres, and modes from revealing their own symbolic categories and values. As for "destiny," Jameson does not define the word, but his use implies, in general, a trajectory of future historical development that is constructed or is inalterable. He applies the notion to characters, genres, the human race, human social formations, the individual subject, and peoples and their governments. Reading *Sea of Blood* as a "symbolic mediation on the destiny of community" is to see the "revolutionary opera" as having served and continuing to serve the survival interests of the ruling bureaucratic caste in North Korea.

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